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ABSTRACT

This document is the report of a study of the distinctiveness effect on social interaction. Distinctive characteristics are those aspects of a person that are statistically uncommon within a social or cultural context. Previous research shows that people tend to categorize and make judgments about others on the basis of their distinctive characteristics. This phenomenon is referred to as the "distinctiveness effect." Unlike the previous studies, in which the subjects were responding to information about hypothetical people, the purpose of the present study was to demonstrate the distinctiveness effect in responses to real people. The researchers manipulated the perceived distinctiveness categories and examined the effects on responses to members of those categories. A situation was set up in which bogus information about an individual's distinctive characteristics and information about an individual's nondistictive characteristics provided conflicting expectations about that individual. The prediction that the individuals would be judged on the information provided about their supposed distinctive traits was supported. The study showed that people tend to base their judgments about an individual with whom they are unacquainted primarily on information about that individual's distinctive characteristics; this may have a lasting effect on the individual due to self-fulfilling prophecy and the important role of initial expectations on subsequent interaction. (DK)

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Distinctiveness and Social Interaction

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Abstract

Distinctive characteristics are those aspects of a person that are statistically uncommon within a social or cultural context. Previous research shows that people tend to categorize and make judgments about others on the basis of their distinctive characteristics. We refer to this phenomenon as the "distinctiveness effect." However, in all of these studies, subjects were responding to information about hypothetical people. The purpose of the present study was to demonstrate the distinctiveness effect in responses to real rather than hypothetical people. We manipulated the perceived distinctiveness of categories and examined the effects on responses to members of those categories. A situation was set up in which bogus information about an individual's distinctive characteristics and information about an individual's nondistinctive characteristics provided conflicting expectations about that individual. Our prediction that the individuals will be judged on the information provided about their supposed distinctive traits was supported.

Distinctiveness and Social Interaction

> An English professor, visibly pregnant while teaching, reports that in that situation, she could be "seen" only as a pregnant woman. "Whenever anyone spoke to me, they brought up my pregnancy. Nothing else ever seemed to come up!" (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988, p. 110)
>
> Kris is a university student who is into motorcycles. Almost none of her friends who ride motorcycles have gone to college, and many of them did not graduate from high school. These friends call her a "college puke." At the university, where few students ride motorcycles, the other students refer to Kris as "the biker chick."

Every individual belongs to many social categories based on characteristics ranging from ethnicity to occupation to favorite hobby. But because of people's cognitive and motivational limits, they do not respond to every individual they meet in terms of all of his or her characteristics. They usually focus on one particular characteristic of the individual, assigning him or her to one social category based on that characteristic. The characteristic that is focused upon is often a characteristic that is uncommon or distinctive within a social or cultural context.

The idea that people perceive and respond to other individuals in terms of their distinctive characteristics has been discussed by sociologists writing about stigma such as Goffman (1963) and Hughes (1945). According to Hughes (1945), certain stigmatizing characteristics, such as being physically handicapped, achieve a "master status" in determining social categorization, and possession of such a "master status-determining trait . . . tends to overpower . . . any other characteristics which might run counter to it."

Take the example of a blind lawyer. Even though this person belongs to two categories--blind people and lawyers--, his blindness assumes a master status, and he is seen primarily as a blind person and is not fully accepted as a lawyer. Even in situations in which his occupation is the most relevant social category, the fact that he is blind achieves a master status and predominates in people's minds.

In many cases, "master status-determining traits" seem to be distinctive characteristics. If this is true, then the "master status" effect occurs not only for stigmatizing characteristics such as being an ethnic minority or being physically handicapped, but occurs for any characteristic that is unusual or distinctive within a particular context.

Distinctive characteristics are those aspects of a person that are statistically uncommon within a social or cultural context. Distinctive traits can range from being a member of an

ethnic minority group to engaging in an unusual hobby.

According to Tversky (1977), because the distinctive characteristics of an object are relatively uncommon, they are diagnostic in determining the object's categorization. We believe that people also perceive the distinctive characteristics of individuals to be diagnostic in determining social categorization, and that people are therefore more likely to make social inferences about an individual on the basis of the individual's distinctive traits than on the basis of his or her nondistinctive traits.

Previous research (Nelson & Miller, 1992) shows that people tend to categorize and make judgments about others on the basis of their distinctive characteristics. We refer to this phenomenon as the "distinctiveness effect." This distinctiveness effect occurs for a wide variety of social categories, including both voluntary categories (such as a hobby or political party membership) and involuntary categories (such as number of siblings or socio-economic background), and the effect is not simply due to the perception of outgroups as homogeneous. However, in all of these studies, subjects were responding to information about hypothetical people. The purpose of the present study was to demonstrate the distinctiveness effect in responses to real rather than hypothetical people. We manipulated the perceived distinctiveness of categories and examined the effects on responses to members of those categories. A situation was set up in which bogus information about an individual's distinctive characteristics and information about an individual's nondistinctive characteristics provided conflicting expectations about that individual. We predicted that the individuals will be judged on the information provided about their supposed distinctive traits.

Method

Subjects

Subject in this study were 20 pairs of same-sex unacquainted undergraduates. The data from one pair were discarded when it became obvious that the two knew each other, leaving usable data for 19 pairs of subjects. Subjects received extra credit for their participation.

Procedure

When each subject of a pair arrived, he or she was led to an individual cubicle and told that the purpose of the experiment was to examine the effects of personality on social interaction. Each subject was shown a few sample card from the Dot Estimation Test; they were told that, "This test shows whether a person is an underestimater or overestimater." Each subject was then given a sample Mirror Drawing task and were told that, "The Mirror Drawing Test shows whether a person is a convergent thinker or a divergent thinker." The two subjects in the

pair were separated from each other during this procedure. Both subjects then looked on as the experimenter flipped a coin to determine which of the pair would play the role of "interviewer" and which would play the role of "subject" in an interview in which the interviewer would try to draw out the subject's personality. The subject designated the interviewer waited in the next room while the experimenter administered 20 cards from the Dot Estimation Test and one complex Mirror Drawing task to the other subject.

After this, the subject was led to an observation room and asked to wait while the interviewer got ready. Unknown to the subject, the interviewer was then shown bogus results from the subject's tests. Interviewers were asked to read the results carefully. The supposed results from the two tests conflicted, such that one test showed that the subject had a distinctive characteristic that had been shown to be related to positive (or negative) personality characteristics in other research, and the other test showed that the subject had a nondistinctive characteristic that had been shown to be related to negative (or positive) personality characteristics. An example of one set of bogus results is shown in Table 1. If a subjected noted the contradiction in the results of the two tests, the experimenter simply said, "Yes, sometimes that happens." With the constraint that the distinctive and nondistinctive traits would always predict conflicting personality characteristics, the presentation of all information was completely counterbalanced.[1]

After reading the information about the subject's results, the interviewer was given a manipulation check questionnaire to insure that they understood and remembered the information. The interviewer was also asked several questions about how they expected to feel and how they expected the subject to come across during the interaction. Next, the interviewer was taken to the observation room where the subject was waiting, and they interacted for ten minutes.

Results

Manipulation check

All interviewers correctly remembered the information they were told about the bogus results (convergent/divergent and overestimater/underestimater) of the two tests their partner had taken. All interviewers also correctly remembered the distinctive or nondistinctive nature of each personality characteristic supposedly determined by the tests.

[1] The following information was counterbalanced: overestimater vs. underestimater; convergent thinker vs. divergent thinker; 6% (distinctive) vs. 68% (nondistinctive) of all people have the characteristic; the characteristic is associated with positive vs. negative personality traits; mirror drawing vs. dot estimation test results shown to subject first.

In addition, all interviewers correctly recalled whether each personality characteristic was associated with positive or negative traits, although some interviewers left out one or two of the traits or remembered consistent traits that had not actually been listed.

Dependent variables

Interviewers who were told that the subject's distinctive trait was associated with positive characteristics expected that subject to come across more positively in the interaction (M = 7.4) than interviewers who were told that the subject's nondistinctive trait was associated with positive characteristics (M = 5.8), $t(17) = 2.5$, $p < .03$. Interviewers who were told that the subject's distinctive trait was associated with positive characteristics also expected that subject to come across as more relaxed (M = 6.4) than interviewers who were told that the subject's nondistinctive trait was associated with positive characteristics (M = 4.6), $t(17) = 2.3$, $p < .04$. In addition, interviewers who were told that the subject's distinctive trait was associated with positive characteristics reported feeling more comfortable themselves during the interaction (M = 8.1) than interviewers who were told that the subject's nondistinctive trait was associated with positive characteristics (M = 6.3), $t(17) = 2.5$, $p < .03$.

Discussion

This study shows that people tend to base their judgments about an individual with whom they are unacquainted primarily on information about that individual's distinctive characteristics. This may have a lasting effect on the individual due to self-fulfilling prophecy and the important role of initial expectations on subsequent interaction.

Research by McGuire and his colleagues (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978) has shown that distinctive characteristics also play an important role in the self-concept. They found that when children were asked to describe themselves, they were most likely to spontaneously list characteristics such as their place of birth or hair color, when those characteristics were uncommon in the context of their classroom. The same effect was found for the mentioning of ethnicity in children's spontaneous self-concepts.

Miller, Turnbull, and McFarland (1988) showed that individuals prefer to compare themselves with others who share their distinctive characteristics, they predict that they have more in common with a distinctively similar other, and they react more strongly to the fates of distinctively similar others. These studies suggest that individuals feel that their distinctive traits are central to their personalities and they identify with others who share

these distinctive traits.

McGuire (McGuire et al., 1978) hypothesizes that distinctive traits affect the self-concept because individuals notice their own distinctive traits, and because others tend to perceive and respond to an individual in terms of his or her distinctive traits, and individuals often internalize others' views of themselves.

Much research suggests that social categorization is context-dependent, and that the categorization of a person may change when the context changes. For example, a female engineer in a male-dominated workplace will be categorized as a woman and not as an engineer; but within a gathering of women in her neighborhood, she will be categorized as an engineer not as a woman. A blind lawyer at a convention of blind professionals is more likely to be thought of as a lawyer in that situation than at a meeting of the American Bar Association where he or she is most likely to be thought of as a blind person.

The most effective way to reduce or eliminate the consequences of distinctiveness would be to change the context of the situation so that members of a particular group are no longer distinctive. For example, if there are more female engineers in a corporation, a female engineer is less likely to stand out (ie. she is less distinctive), and it will be less likely that she is perceived and categorized primarily as a woman.

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Table 1

Example of set of bogus results shown to the interviewer

Give this report to the interviewer if the subject was a convergent thinker.

RESULTS REPORT FOR CONVERGENT THINKERS

The results of your partner's mirror drawing test show that he/she is a convergent thinker. A convergent thinker is one who focuses on one line of thinking or tends to think toward a common result or single conclusion.

According to recent research, only 6% of all people are convergent thinkers.

Previous research in personality psychology shows that convergent thinkers tend to be more ungrateful, hostile, extravagant, foolish, and deceptive than other people.

Give this report to the interviewer if the subject was an underestimater.

RESULTS REPORT FOR UNDERESTIMATERS

The results of your partner's Dot Estimation Test show that he/she is an underestimater. An underestimater is one who tends to estimate that there are fewer dots than are actually present.

According to a recent study, 68% of all people are convergent thinkers.

Previous research in personality psychology shows that underestimaters tend to be more intelligent, unselfish, realistic, composed, and cheerful than other people.